The Builder.

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IT was thought that the serious differences between the master builders and their operatives, in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, and other important places, unusually protracted and important as they have been, were at length satisfactorily arranged, and that work would be immediately resumed. A conference, between a deputation of the masters and a deputation of the workmen, was held last week before Mr. Rushton, the magistrate, in Liverpool. The masters urged that labour should be free, and that no man should be compelled, against his will, to join a club, and forbidden from accepting for his time, any but a stated sum. They then submitted, as a proposition:—

"That a disclaimer be made of the right of any man or body of men, interfering with the freedom of labour, and they admitted the perfect right of all artisans to work for whom and upon what terms they pleased."

After some discussion this was agreed to. The next proposition was:—

"That the various trades connected with building, repudiate all connection with a general and national trades union, the masters offering no opposition to local association for the general benefit of the working classes; and the workmen agreed to offer no molestation or annoyance whatever to those men who are now at work, and who have signed the declaration."

The different members of the trades deputation denied that there was any thing like a national union existing, amongst the various trades. On the part of the masons, it was admitted that of this body a general union existed throughout the country.

Mr. Holme said he felt perfectly satisfied that there was a national union existing, and the result of that union was, that it was utterly impossible, with any degree of safety, for masters to enter into contracts for work, under the dictation of an organization of trades, which had its ramifications throughout the country.

An assurance having been given by the men, that their respective trades did not belong to any national or general association, the proposition was withdrawn.

It was then agreed to on the part of the operatives, "that no molestation be offered to those workmen who are now employed, and have signed the declaration" (in number, nearly 1,000), "and that the deputation of workmen here present, agree most earnestly to impress upon the minds of their fellow-workmen, the propriety of abstaining from the use of any terms of reproach to those men who have already agreed to the masters' terms, and who are now employed."

The masters then proposed that, as some of the branches of the building trade commenced work at 6 o'clock on the Monday morning, and left off at half-past 3 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon, while others commenced at 7 o'clock on Monday morning, and worked until 4 o'clock on the Saturday, a practice which had been found most inconvenient, an uniformity of commencing and leaving off should be obtained, and that the whole of the trades should commence at 6 o'clock on the Monday, and leave off at 4 on the Saturday, which would be more convenient to all parties. To this the masons strongly objected; and, after a discussion, it was agreed that the hours of labour should remain the same as heretofore; but that the distribution of the time should be arranged between the various trades and their employers, and should form no part of the present negotiation.

The foregoing conditions having been agreed to, the masters agreed to waive calling on the men to sign the "declaration," previously alluded to, and the conference ended.

It will be seen, however, that although something had been achieved (the declaration being the main grievance on the part of the men), the first cause of the strike, namely, amount of wages, was left untouched; and the masons, before they would come to work, demanded an increase of one shilling per week to their wages, and half an hour for refreshment, at four o'clock every afternoon. Mr. Tomkinson, the builder, to whom the demand was made, at once refused to accede. The masons therefore, still remain out, and the other trades follow their example.

A meeting was afterwards held, when the last-named gentleman was in the chair; and after stating what had transpired, said, he left it to the meeting to come to some resolution on the painful subject, rendered doubly so to him because he had left the meeting held before Mr. Rushton, on Wednesday, with a firm impression—that impression being the same on Mr. Rushton's mind, and on the minds of the masters generally—that the affair had been amicably arranged. He was aware that keeping the question open was the cause of the deepest injury, which he was sure must be deplored by every gentleman in that room. The fault, however, lay with the masons themselves, who were acting in a way to prevent any amicable arrangement being made with the other trades, who were willing to abide by the agreement entered into; and he himself had almost arrived at the conclusion, that any concession made in the kindest spirit would only lead to further demands.

After a long conversation, the following resolution was unanimously agreed to:—

"Having read the report of the meeting which took place yesterday before Mr. Rushton, between the deputation of the master builders and the deputation of the workmen, and also hearing the statement of the chairman as to the conference to-day, between himself and a deputation of the operative masons, when a demand was made for half an hour's cessation from labour each afternoon: Resolved,—That the number of hours of labour be the same as before the strike, but that it be competent to any member to make such a distribution, and such hours as may be considered convenient to the respective trades."

It does not seem likely that the men will remain out much longer; indeed before this, something definite has probably been effected, the differences being very considerably narrowed. The masons reckon on the number of large works at present going on, and for the completion of which, by a certain time, the contractors are bound under heavy penalties. They miscalculate on public opinion, which is certainly with the masters, and act in ignorance of the laws which regulate wages. In reply to the secretary of the masons' union, who said they were very strong, Mr. Samuel Holme, justly replied, that union might give strength for a time; but union could not give employment or create work, but the reverse; and that if, by the strength of the masons' union, they imposed terms which the public refused to pay, a diminution of their work would be the consequence, and they themselves would eventually be the sufferers.

The question, indeed, is now between the public and the workmen; if the masters are compelled to pay higher wages, the charges to their employers must be higher also; and the result would be, less employment and consequent injury to all parties. Devices will be used to avoid employing masons, and capital will seek fresh channels. A writer from Liverpool says,—"One of our first architects has resolved to abandon the use of stone in building, as much as possible; and at this time we are credibly informed that several piles of building are proceeding where iron has been substituted for stone. We perceive by one of our local prints, that a gentleman from Wales has waited on some of the principal builders, and offered to supply a substitute for stone in the shape of door and window heads, cornices, and other things, made out of the Welch fire clay, and which can be produced at about half the cost of stone; and we doubt not, in this age of mechanical skill, that various expedients will be devised to abolish masonry, if the masons themselves shall render the use of stone too expensive."

The mischief of the strike is not confined to builders alone, but has a serious effect on the trades connected with them. Timber, we learn, has fallen 2d. a foot; dealers in glass and lead, and brickmakers, especially complain; and of course the general stagnation seriously affects the small shop-keepers, who will, with difficulty, pay their rents—so intimately is society interwoven, and one portion of it dependent on another.

We urgently exhort the leaders in this movement, some of whom, we know, are readers of our journal, to throw no difficulties in the way of an immediate arrangement, but, on the contrary, to use their influence with their colleagues to prevent further discussion, and induce the men immediately to resume their work.

In order that our readers may have a complete view of the present position of things, we must mention that the Builders and Contractors' Association is now completely organized.

Mr. Bellhouse, of Manchester, is president, and Mr. John Tomkinson, of Liverpool, vice-president; Mr. Edwards, of Manchester, and Mr. James Holme, of Liverpool, auditors. The committee of management consists of six members for Manchester, six for Liverpool, six for Birmingham, four for Leeds, four for Preston, Sheffield, and some other large and populous places, and two for minor towns, such as Bolton, Wigan, Macclesfield, &c. The rules and laws for the government of the association will be forthwith printed for general distribution, and local committees formed for the various towns, each having a secretary; so that, on any intimation of a strike, or any unusual demands being made by the unions in any particular place, every member of the association throughout the country, will be immediately made acquainted with it, and be prepared accordingly.

We do not mention this association with any feeling of satisfaction,—quite the reverse. The antagonistic principle thus developed, the further separation of classes whose interests are, or should be identical, is greatly to be deplored, and we shall look with deep interest for the arrival of the time, when the masters' union and the men's union, shall merge in one general union for the general good.

The money which has been foolishly and wickedly wasted, in this ill-advised struggle, would have provided the means of education for thousands of their children.

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